

Ottawa concerned with situation in Thunder Bay, but not willing to step in without an invitation

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(Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale meeting with reporters after cabinet Tuesday in Ottawa. Photo: APTN)

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Canada's Minister of Public Safety says the federal government will not involve itself in the policing issues in Thunder Bay unless the province of Ontario or the city requests help.

On Tuesday, Ralph Goodale said while the federal government is concerned, it will not act without being asked.

“This is within the purview of the province, and it’s not in the principal jurisdiction of the Government of Canada,” said Goodale. “But we do obviously take issues in relation to the confidence that people have in public safety broadly and in the – the ability of our institutions and organizations to function successfully. That’s a concern for all people at all levels.”

The call for federal help came on May 31, when leaders within the Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) called for the RCMP to step in and take over investigations from the Thunder Bay police. The request came after the body of Josiah Begg, 14, was found in the river on May 18. NAN leaders said they had lost faith in the police because the search took too long to organize, and there were too many concerns with other cases.

But Goodale said despite the call coming from First Nations leaders, Canada cannot usurp provincial jurisdiction.

“We are there to assist and help and cooperate and do whatever we can to – to find answers and bring about appropriate solutions, but the jurisdiction of the province is paramount in these circumstances. We’re ready to help if we can, and we would be willing to receive a representation or a request or whatever, but it is first and foremost the responsibility of the – of the provincial and municipal jurisdiction,” said Goodale.

The Thunder Bay police force has been under siege lately.

- The city’s police force is under intense scrutiny for how it investigated a number of Indigenous students who died in the city’s rivers.
- Ontario’s police watchdog is conducting a systemic review of how the force handles crimes against Indigenous peoples in the city. Gerry McNeilly recently expanded his review to include the investigation into the death of Tammy Keeash, 17, and how police handled the search for Begg.
- The city’s police board is under review from the Ontario Civilian Police Commission to determine if it has been giving the force the proper guidance from the community.

- Police Chief JP Levesque is charged with obstruction of justice and breach of trust.

Also, several *APTN* stories have raised questions about the quality of the Thunder Bay police investigations into several deaths of Indigenous peoples including Jordan Wabasse, who died in 2011 and Keeash, whose body was discovered May 7.

Police said both drowned and no “criminality” was suspected.

The city’s interim police chief said at a news conference last week that it was “business as usual” at the force.

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